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It Takes a Village: Taking Greater Advantage of Our Scholarly Diversity

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It Takes a Village: Taking Greater Advantage of Our Scholarly Diversity

Abstract

As I suspect is true for most media studies scholars, there are many things on my “wish list” for our field: a greater appreciation of the political relevance of what, at least in most quantitative studies of political communication, is too quickly dismissed as “mere” entertainment or popular culture; a more sophisticated conceptualization of politics and power within cultural studies approaches to media; a more critical sensibility to how we approach our research; a greater emphasis on the larger economic, cultural, political, and technological environments within which communication occurs; more comparative and global research; a better understanding of how new media technologies are fundamentally changing communicative relationships; more research that finds its way into larger public, policy maker, and advocacy discourse about the role of the media in a democratic society; and so on.

Disciplines

Communication

It Takes a Village

Taking Greater Advantage of Our Scholarly Diversity

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Many of the things I just listed will be familiar to readers of *Television & New Media*, as these topics and approaches have guided its editorial policy in the past decade. But it is my sense that even within the pages of the journal, more so across the larger field of communication, and most dramatically between our field and other related fields and disciplines, we are too often talking past each other and in doing so are losing important opportunities to learn from each other. “What we have here,” to quote Strother Martin’s character in *Cool Hand Luke*, “is a failure to communicate.”

I do not say this naively. I realize there are methodological, epistemological, and normative differences across scholars and subfields that are both healthy and difficult to ford. And I realize that a call for more constructive dialogue and greater cross-fertilization across these divides can slip easily into a kind of disciplinary hegemony: We must remember that Martin’s character of “the captain” was not inviting Luke to sit down and discuss their differences of opinion! But by Balkanizing our field, I believe we are not taking full advantage of what are among its greatest strengths: its multidisciplinary and its diverse methodologies.

Consider, for example, the issue of media ownership. Much of the research in this area is motivated by the belief that democratic politics and culture is best served by a diverse information environment and by the concern that centralized ownership leads to a narrowing and biasing of this environment. But is this true? Under what circumstances? To what effects? With what solutions? Answering these and related questions in a theoretically rich, empirically sound, and ultimately policy relevant way is best done by engaging a wide range of approaches and foci: interpretive histories (e.g., Douglas 1987); media economics (e.g., Waldfogel 2007); the political economy of national and global media (e.g., McChesney 2000; Schiller 1999); policy, regulatory, and legal studies (e.g., Baker 2007); comparative analyses of national media systems (e.g., Hallin and Mancini 2004); empirical studies of the relationship between ownership and content diversity (e.g., Napoli 2007); systematic studies of media access and use patterns (e.g., Norris 2001); the theoretical and empirical implications of new media technologies (e.g., Prior 2007; Turow 2006); the impact of media in general and media diversity in particular on public attitudes and actions (Baum 2003; Zaller 1992); and so on. These and similar studies vary greatly in their normative starting points, levels of analyses, data and methods, and substantive

conclusions. And many never directly consider the relevance of their findings to issues of media ownership. But all tell us something about the relationship between the structure of the media environment in which we live and democratic practices in which we engage.

Of course, it would be unrealistic to expect any individual scholar to keep up with, let alone master, the wide range of theory, methods, and research that is of relevance to the topics we study. But there are things we can do as a field to take fuller advantage of our collective knowledge, including taking a more “problem-oriented” approach to our research, providing more forums (in person, online, and in print) for scholars of varying stripes to interact, engaging in more collaborative research, and moving, when appropriate, beyond critiquing existing conditions (or at the opposite extreme, reifying them) toward more concrete recommendations that can become part of the larger public discourse.

In short, the issues we face as a field are not unlike those faced by the very people, groups, and institutions we study: how to structure and negotiate the overwhelming information environment in which we now live so as to best acknowledge and nurture difference, while also encouraging collaboration and community. Who better than communication scholars to take on this task?

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Michael X. Delli Carpini is the dean of the Annenberg School for Communication. His research explores the role of the citizen in American politics, with particular emphasis on the impact of the mass media on public opinion, political knowledge, and political participation.